

# What it's like being a first-time female founder at fifty

*Chairing meetings in the latter stages of my NHS career, I remember being exasperated that more and more people would mutter and mumble their way through meetings. I had no idea the problem was actually mine.*

Temps de lecture : minute

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Before becoming a founder, I worked in the NHS for nearly thirty years. This is a world defined by preventing ill health and finding new ways to make people better. I spent my days commissioning care for local people, and yet I had no idea of the prevalence nor impact of hearing loss on our overall well-being until I entered the world of start-ups in 2019.

When I left the NHS I was 52 and looking for new opportunities. I joined the Zinc Accelerator's Mission 3: a programme designed to build businesses to improve the quality of later life for millions of older people. It was a great opportunity to learn about influencing population health from a different perspective. And perspective, I certainly gained.

On one particular day the technology lead of the RNID gave a talk on hearing health. She was describing the common symptoms of hearing loss and I was shocked to realise that everything she was saying applied not only to my parents, but also to me. The "mumbling", the straining to hear, the exhaustion I'd feel after meetings or social events: I was living with unaddressed hearing loss, and this inspired the company I run today.

My startup, which I co-founded with ex-DJ and digital products specialist Andy Shanks, is called eargym: it's a tech platform which enables anyone

to test, train and improve their hearing health via an app. We started the company because, contrary to popular belief, hearing loss is not an inevitable consequence of ageing. Hearing loss is correlated with a myriad of other health conditions such as stress and depression. Few people realise that even mild hearing loss can double our risk of dementia, an illness which has seriously impacted my own family.

Andy and I both felt passionately that this was a problem we were well-positioned to solve, but entering the world of startups was a daunting challenge..

The tech and startup sector isn't exactly awash with women in their fifties. Less than a quarter of healthtech founders are women and the average age of a startup founder is 38.

I'd also come from public service. In the NHS, we're not really set up to move fast and break things (quite the opposite, in fact). I knew I had lots to learn and I experienced significant imposter syndrome for some while. I'd sit in sessions being led by start-up experts, jotting down acronyms to research quietly later.

I felt like a rabbit in the headlights at first. I'd built a decent career in the NHS and I could have easily taken the well-trodden (and well-paid) path for ex-NHS executives: business consulting.

But I'd read something that struck a chord and shifted my perspective. In *The 100 Year Life* by Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott they talk about how, as our lifespan lengthens, we will move from a three phase life (made up of education, work and retirement) to a four phase life (education, working for asset, working for contribution, and retirement). I decided I had at least 25 more years of productive life left in me and that it was time to enter the third phase of my 100 year life; working for contribution.

It has been both terrifying and brilliant to start a completely new career in my fifties, with all the knowledge, connections and challenges entrepreneurship brings. I've experienced so many firsts: before eargym I had never written a pitch deck, pitched to investors or hired and instructed UX developers. I'd never spoken at international tech conferences, nor built a remote-first team. It has been an immensely challenging but highly rewarding journey so far. And most importantly, I've never been happier in my work.

We've only been around a short while, but eargym already has thousands of users. We've been supported with research grants by prestigious organisations like the UKRI and Alzheimer's Society. We've delivered really important awareness-raising through targeted media coverage and there's no doubt my NHS background has helped us build inroads, key relationships, credibility and trust.

The best advice I can offer to other female founders looking to explore a second career in startups is to embrace the new challenge. Leverage the skills you've gained to-date to propel you forward as you build your business and make your contribution.

Working in startups is all about facing the unknown, taking risks and pursuing new opportunities. There is rarely a "right" path, which has been a valuable lesson I've learnt that applies to both business and life. There are always many potential choices, but at a certain point you have to take an educated leap. In my view, entrepreneurship was a leap worth taking.

Amanda Philpott, co-founder and CEO at eargym

